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Local beekeepers feel the sting of honeybee shortage

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Beekeeper Oliver Henderson has been affected by the worldwide decline in the honey bee population. He says he isn't sure of the cause. (Charlie Cox photo)

In the past, they may have gone unnoticed, but now the decline of honeybees is causing quite the buzz.

While the problem is worldwide, local beekeepers are feeling the sting of the shortage as well.

Rick Sutton of Lancaster owns 500 hives and says the population decline has affected both honey production and pollination needs.

"We're migratory beekeepers," Sutton explained, "meaning that we take our hives to Florida in the winter."

In the process of moving them back and forth, more than 75 hives were lost.

Sutton is uncertain why honeybee numbers are dwindling, but he has an idea. He thinks it's due to a new insecticide being used.

To Sutton, the decline is just the most recent in a line of unfortunate events for beekeepers.

"Personally, over the years, we've been hit with mites, hurricanes and other things. With beekeeping, you have your good years and you have your bad," he said.

"2007's crop could have been phenomenal, but it's been disastrous, and is shaping up to wipe out the crop of '08."

Danville beekeeper Oliver Henderson harvests honey for himself and his wife, Jane, and uses the bees to pollinate their spacious garden.

He thought his bee needs could be sustained by two hives. And they were, at least until the epidemic hit.

Integral part of food chain

"After the bees started dying off, we had to go up to five hives, and we really don't have that much honey left to get us by," said Henderson, who's struggling to make back his \$1,800 investment in beekeeping supplies.

Last year, his bees produced no unusable honey.

Honeybees, unbeknownst to some, are an integral part of maintaining the balance for our nation's food supply. Honey bees account for 80 percent of the world's pollinating insects and are responsible for more than one-third of all of the fruits and vegetables consumers use.

Without honey bees, we could be in a hornet's nest of trouble, said Tom Webster, a researcher and extension specialist at Kentucky State University, where he's concentrating on finding a way to explain the honeybee dilemma.

"I think people really do not view the big picture here," said Webster. "On merely an economic level, business revenue created out of the productivity of the honeybees topped \$14 billion in 2000, and today that number is probably much closer to \$20 billion."

According to Webster, the problems go far beyond affecting the consumption of fruits and vegetables. "Again, people must realize the big picture. Not only is much of our food pollinated by honeybees, several other plants typically not thought of are as well.

"Take, for instance, alfalfa, it's pollinated by the honeybees. Cows eat the plant, which means the honeybee shortage could have an effect on our dairy production as well. Agriculture is very inter-related."

No cause identified

There have been other honeybee shortages in the past, Webster said, but past declines have been because of apparent reasons such as mites in the mid-'90s. What makes the current decline special, in addition to the severity and quick rate, is the fact that no one has any idea of the cause.

"It could be a number of things," said Webster, "But we're really not sure of what's behind this. Personally, I think it could be a deficiency in the diet of the bees, or maybe a pathogen of some kind."

Webster insists that at this time that's merely speculation. "There really isn't a clear cut answer. Plenty of theories, but no answers."

One popular theory the researcher is quick to dispel is made popular by late-night commentators that cell-phone usage is responsible. "That's a rumor that has snowballed, and there's really no truth to that whatsoever."

Theories and speculation aside, both local beekeepers would like the decline to end, though for someone witnessing losses in production, Henderson is surprisingly optimistic.

"I think we'll have a better turnout this year. I feel good about it. But it sure would be nice if we could figure out what's doing this to the bees."

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